Using Social Media: Managing the Good and the Bad

Everywhere you look today you are likely to hear someone talking about social media. The numbers are astounding: Facebook anticipates reaching one billion users in 2011; 13% of American adults have used Twitter; and the newest social media outlet, Google+, reports more than four million users within weeks of its unveiling. There are some major benefits to utilizing social networking sites to get the word out about your marriage and relationship education (MRE) program and connect with couples who may benefit from your services. While the benefits should not be underestimated, there are certain challenges and concerns for marriage educators when using social media. This Tip Sheet provides tips for practitioners to enjoy the benefits of social media, while also preparing for and addressing difficult situations that may arise.

The Benefits of Social Media to Your MRE Program

There are many positive aspects of using social media to enhance your MRE services and reach your target audiences, especially younger populations.

•   **It provides an opportunity to interact with your target audience.** You are able to respond to questions from fans and followers, build relationships and maintain on-going engagement with your participants.

•   **You can track it.** Most social media sites have built-in analytics programs that allow you to measure your organization's presence. You can see how many people clicked or commented on your content or how many people shared your content with friends, which you cannot do with a brochure or flyer.

•   **Your followers and fans can share it.** This new media landscape is all about sharing content. With one click, users can let their friends know what your program is all about, the services you offer and upcoming events, while helping you obtain a growing number of fans and followers. The potential to spread awareness via word-of-mouth is huge, especially when you keep your information fresh and up-to-date.

•   **You save money.** Very few social media sites charge users to participate. It costs nothing to set up a profile and use the sites regularly. It is easy to raise awareness, disseminate your message and keep participants engaged in your program with your only investment being time.

The Not-So-Friendly Side of Social Media

As with any form of outreach or communication regarding your program, there is always the potential for "sticky situations" to arise. What if someone posts something inappropriate on your profile, uses threatening language or is otherwise being belligerent? What if someone picks a fight with another user? What if a user posts personal information—say, disclosure of family violence? These incidents are rare but organizations should be prepared. The following tips can help you prepare a plan of action to manage your social media venue.

1.   Create community guidelines for your organization's social media profiles and define what behavior will not be tolerated. Make sure each administrator is knowledgeable of these guidelines and is prepared to take necessary action. This will require having an administrator who can monitor the discussions. The public guidelines on your page should address:

•   **Profanity.** Most likely, your organization will take a stance that any posts with profane language will be deleted immediately upon the first offense. At the second offense, that user might be permanently banned from your profile.

•   **Threats.** Threats will be documented and investigated properly.

•   **Respect.** Simply asking fans to respect each other and their personal opinions will go a long way in preventing blowups down the line.

•   **Actions that will result in being blocked from the page.** When users know up front what type of behavior will cause them to be banned from the page, they are more likely to abide by the rules

you set forth.

2.   Use the same judgment you would use offline. The only difference is the medium in which the situation occurs. Remember that social media is simply an extension of "the real world." However, some people may "say" something in an online forum which they would not express face-to-face. This can be good or bad. Threats and other intimidating behavior carry the same weight online as they do in person.

•   If you perceive a threat to a client, your organization's staff members, or anyone else, report it to the police (see below for ways to capture the threat for police).

•   If a client or potential client confides personal information online, follow up with the person to discuss next steps and offer any assistance you can.

3.   Do not wait until a situation arises to prepare a response. Be proactive; create an "In Case of Emergency" toolkit. This toolkit should outline:

•   **Whether the offensive post warrants a response online or through other channels.** As a general rule, the more severe situations are usually handled offline. For a first minor offense, a simple online warning should suffice. Example: "We do not permit posts with profanity on our page. For a helpful reminder of our community guidelines, please click here (link to guidelines)."

•   **Whether the authorities should be involved.** If there is any reason to believe that bodily harm will occur to any individual, police should be called immediately. Make sure a screenshot of any threat is recorded for backup. A user might make a threat and then later delete it. (To do this, make sure the

post is displaying on your screen, click the "Print Screen" key and "paste" into a Word document.)

• **Whether the offending user should be blocked.** Again, this depends on the severity of the incident. For the more severe offenses, blocking a user is usually the best course of action. On most social media sites there is a way to keep specific users from interacting with your organization. Each social networking site will provide instructions to "block" an offending member.

• **Who should respond to the offensive post?** If there are multiple people in charge of your organization's social media accounts, there should be one point person to handle responses to offensive posts. Also, that person should keep a record or log of offenders so that if he or she is unavailable when an offender makes another offensive post, another person can handle the issue.

With the proper precautions, having a social media presence will undoubtedly be a great experience for you and your organization. Creating community guidelines and an "In Case Of Emergency" toolkit will save your organization time and energy in dealing with problematic posts from users. Serious incidents are undoubtedly rare, but it is better to be prepared for an event than to be caught off guard.